

BORDERS, BORDERING AND THE LIMITS OF DEMOCRACY: RETHINKING
THE BOUNDARIES OF TERRITORIAL SOVEREIGNTY

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With every piece of work that strays into neighboring territory... we must resign ourselves to the realization that the best we can hope for is to provide the expert with useful questions of the sort that he may not easily discover for himself from his own vantage point inside his discipline.

—Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation”

Introduction

The modern state has enjoyed roughly five hundred years as the primary mode of organizing Western political life. For the last one hundred and thirty or so years, this mode has been realized in the form of the nation-state, an entity which has dominated political theory and practice to the extent that, during its career, life in common has been rarely conceived without some reference to its structures or operations. Of course, neither the modern state in general, nor the nation-state in particular, have ever gone unchallenged. The infancy of the latter was an especially precarious time for the state-form, and critical legacies of this early period remain today. Nonetheless, the nation-state has survived, and even matured. Our world at the beginning of the twenty-first century is a world of diverse and sovereign nation-states.

But for how long? The nation-state has once again entered a period of critical scrutiny, this one arguably brought on by the very successes of its mature forms. The nation-state has successfully served private capitalist development, which has flourished into international free trade that overflows national borders and evades state economic policy. It has served representative democracy, which has also outgrown the state and now tends, as in Europe, toward supranational representative polities. Finally, it has served popular self-determination, which has manifested in the international cross-pollination of cultures, boundary-crossing migrations of expatriates and refugees, and identity movements which variously resituate, contest or ignore the structures of the nation-state. In other words, the successes of the modern state appear to have outgrown the state-form, and the globalized economic, political and social contours of

contemporary life have prompted a widespread reconsideration of the role of the state itself.

This reconsideration has occurred across political spectrums and disciplinary boundaries, and it has been attended by diverse attitudes, from optimism which looks forward to transnational liberalism or global cosmopolitanism, pessimism which foresees post-national forms of imperialism, engagement which agitates for unbordered democracy, and resignation which awaits the determination of global social and political life by lifeless economic objectivity.¹ Despite the diversity of such outlooks, as well as the kinds of ascendant post-national polities said to be just over the horizon, these critical analyses of the nation state are united in their basic claim: “the ‘Westphalian moment’ is passing” (Ferguson and Mansbach 2004, p.1). In other words, we are currently witnessing the eclipse of the state as we know it.

At the heart of this claim lies a suspicion that the modern state’s fundamental aspiration to territorial sovereignty has been outmoded by the global nature of economic, social and political life. Nowhere is this purported obsolescence more concrete than at the borders of the nation-state, the limits which designate the spatial beginning and end of sovereign power. As Ingeborg Maus writes in a recent article:

There is complete agreement about the essential feature behind the obsolescence of the nation-state: the principle of fixed state borders. This principle is understood as one that, by establishing political particularism through territorial enclosure, has degenerated into simple provincialism in view of the *de facto* debordering of all important political issues through

¹ I have in mind John Rawls in *The Law of Peoples* and Seyla Benhabib in *The Rights of Others* and *Another Cosmopolitanism* as the optimists, Jean-Marie Guéhenno in *The End of the Nation-State* as the pessimist, and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Multitude* as the engaged agitators. The characterization of the resigned economic determinist comes from Ingeborg Maus’s scathing diagnosis of various forms of global statism in “From Nation-State to Global State, or the Decline of Democracy.”

the globalization of economic power and environmental damage as well as migration (Maus 2006, p. 466).²

A poster created for the mobilization against the 2007 G8 summit expresses the same thought in a different voice:

Borders. Rolled out, seemingly arbitrarily. Segregating. Stratifying. Governed and sometimes guarded. Between and within territories. Yet these borders are never entirely impermeable. There are always flight lines which take us through them and beyond—their realisation expressive of an irrepressible desire. As deterritorialisation is enacted, everyone finds themselves constituent of a new social reality—a process which nobody can hold back (Fels and image-shift 2007).

The persistence of territorial borders, so the basic argument goes, is out of step with the increasingly deterritorialized and unbordered reality of global affairs.

* * *

In this paper, I will critically examine the presumed obsolescence of national borders and conclude that such borders may be anachronistic, but they are far from obsolete. In other words, borders—if indeed they are the institutions of a passing historical moment—may be out of harmony with the affairs of the present, but this disharmony does not undermine their contemporary relevance. While much has been said regarding the persistence of bordered life, I believe the present endeavor to be unique. Below, I trouble the basic argument for obsolescence by revealing it to be based on a contrast, not between two incompatible realities—the reality of unbordered life and the real function of borders—but between contemporary reality and an outdated *ideal*. What makes borders appear obsolete, in other words, is not what they *are*, but what they *ideally* are, not what they *do*, but what they are *purported* to do. The contrast is thus merely a matter of an unrealized and outmoded ideal. More importantly, I will argue that

² This is Maus's characterization of contemporary thought on the obsolescence of the nation-state; it does not characterize her own view. I engage her views more directly in section IV.

the real function of national borders is perfectly compatible with current trends in global affairs. Finally, I will show that the specific function of borders in contemporary social and political life suggests the endurance of essential features of the modern state within our so-called postmodern world.

The crux and the uniqueness of this argument will be in providing an account of what I have just described as “the real function of national borders.” By juxtaposing an alternative view of borders to established conceptions, I do not mean to claim some kind of final epistemic privilege. I do believe that what I have to say is a correct account of “the way things are,” but I do not pretend that the validity of my account is totally exclusive. The central advantage of my conceptualization is that it dissolves an apparent contradiction and opens up new diagnostic and productive lines of thought. Although my account is not particularly Foucaultian, it is inspired by Foucault’s analysis of prisons in *Discipline and Punish*. Here, Foucault very simply identifies how penitentiary institutions are, according to their explicit purposes, miserable failures; he then attempts to rethink prisons from the point of view of this failure, and identifies effects of incarceration that, according to unstated purposes, justify and sustain their operation (Foucault 1995, p. 272). On the other hand, my analysis *is* rather indebted to Marx, and I take seriously his thought that “to formulate a question is to resolve it” (Marx 1978b, p. 28). I intend the proposed account of borders to reformulate the question of their obsolescence, hopefully complicating its currently vogue resolutions and opening new directions for thinking unbordered life.

One final note is in order before beginning. By arguing both for the contemporary relevance of territorial boundaries and for the likely persistence of specific

forms of modern sovereignty, I do not mean to give an *apologia* for national borders. Rather, I intend my analysis to be deeply critical, both in the sense that it reveals and situates itself in a space between the ideal and the real aspects of its object, and in the sense that it condemns, and hopes to work against, what it discovers in that space. I will be explicitly normative now so that I do not have to be so in the thick of my analysis: the contemporary functioning of national borders is, in my opinion, an unfortunate one. This means that—for myself and for others who find my analysis compelling—there is critical work to be done, both theoretical and practical. However, I also believe the underlying function of territorial boundaries to be, at present, ineliminable. This does not mean that further critical work is pointless. Rather, like all important critical engagement, it must be deeper than would at first appear necessary. I will return to this thought briefly in the final section of this paper. For now, I turn to the purported obsolescence and evolving ideal of national borders.

The Ideal and Institutionalization of Sovereign Territory

At the heart of most arguments for the obsolescence of national borders is a growing skepticism regarding the linkage of territoriality and sovereignty that is central to the modern state. Although territory and authority have been interrelated since at least the late middle ages, contemporary political geography confirms that a “sovereign territorial ideal,” formalized by the Peace of Westphalia, has held almost exclusive influence in political thought and practice since the 17th century (Murphy 1996, p. 82). In this conceptual framework, state power is conceived as extending primarily over a space and secondarily over its inhabitants, who may come and go without fundamentally

altering the extent of state sovereignty.³ This primacy of space to people structures Max Weber's classical definition of the state, which claims, "The state is the form of human community that (successfully) lays claim to the *monopoly of legitimate physical violence* within a particular territory—and this idea of 'territory' is an essentially defining feature" (Weber 2004, p. 33). Weber's emphasis on the use of violence and its spatial dominion, together with his lack of emphasis on the population subject to violence within that space, is typical of the modern ideal of sovereignty. The notion of popular sovereignty realized in the contemporary nation-state maintains this emphasis by defining a population largely in terms of its geographic coherence, and by making citizenship primarily a matter of birth or residency within a state's territory.⁴ Thus, even today, "sovereignty is almost inextricably linked to territoriality" (Ansell 2004, p. 7).

The modern link between sovereignty and territory entails that the latter must be well-defined so that the former can be unambiguous; hence the importance of borders. "As the government of people gave way to the government of territory, so the need for clearly bounded divisions of ownership and control correspondingly increased...

Territoriality thus became one of the first conditions of the state's existence, and the *sine qua non* of its borders" (Donnan and Wilson 1998, p. 8).⁵ National borders are thus the

³ Foucault puts this well in his discussion of Machiavelli in "Governmentality:" "Sovereignty is not exercised on things, but above all on territory *and consequently* on the subjects who inhabit it" (Foucault 2001, p. 208; italics mine).

⁴ "The nation-state introduced a precise sense of territorial identity and of territorial control" (Anderson 1996, p. 25). Additionally, Alexander Murphy shows that the territorial understanding of sovereignty was intensified, rather than undermined, by the rise of the nation-state and the location of sovereignty in the people rather than the ruler (Murphy 1996, p. 96). His fundamental claim is that contemporary conceptions of political life remain beholden to the political-territorial understanding of sovereignty (Ibid, p. 81-2, 110-2). See also Donnan and Wilson 1998, p. 7-11. I come back to the nation-state's territorial definition of "the people" of popular sovereignty in section V.

⁵ Ilido do Amaral makes a similar point, with more explicit attention to the link between sovereignty and territoriality: "As the sovereign state has replaced earlier forms of large political regions, it has become essential that sovereignty should have a known exact extent, a territory under exclusive jurisdiction limited by state boundaries" (do Amaral 1994, p. 21).

legacy of the sovereign territorial ideal, and, along with this ideal, their necessity has gone largely unquestioned since the birth of the modern state. The importance of both was significantly confirmed in the aftermath of World War II, when world maps were redrawn and borders reconstructed in an attempt to establish a specific “political-territorial order whose stability was assumed to be the *sine qua non* for global stability” (Murphy 1996, p. 83). Inasmuch as these redrawn and reconstructed lines still structure our geopolitical, political, military, social and economic visions of the world, the sovereign territorial ideal endures today.

However, during the very moment of its confirmation, the territorial ideal of sovereign power began to be challenged by the deterritorialized or cross-territorial nature of social, economic and political life. These challenges included the mass migrations and general displacement caused by the devastation of world war, as well as regional famines, ethnic conflict within and across states and widespread environmental destruction. Moreover, and largely in response to these and other global issues, new forms of international cooperation required a progressive “unbundling of territoriality” that partially dislocated sovereignty from its geographic centers (Ruggie 1993, p. 171). Thus, former military alliances congealed into international organizations such as NATO, which challenged the Weberian triangulation of sovereignty, territory and the legitimate use of violence (especially later, with its use of interventionist tactics in the final decades of the twentieth century). Economic partnerships formed between even former enemies, resulting in entities such as the European Steel and Coal Community and European Economic Community, precursors of the economically and politically integrated

European Union.⁶ International political organizations such as the United Nations and the Arab League were founded with the intent of protecting national-political sovereignty through international cooperation, effectively buttressing a commitment to the sovereign territorial ideal with an admission of its inadequacy. In short, the latter half of the twentieth century was characterized by a both an affirmation of the sovereign territorial ideal and, simultaneously, the progressive deterritorialization of important economic, social and political affairs.

To many observers, the latter trend promises the eclipse the former. According to the basic argument, today's globalized world, with its Nike, NAFTA, WTO, EU, and Internet, renders increasingly obsolete both the sovereign territorial ideal and its primary institutional manifestation, the national border.⁷ However, it is crucial to understand that the institution is not identical to the ideal, and the former may significantly outlive the latter. If territoriality remains, as political anthropologists Donnan and Wilson put it, “the *sine qua non* of...borders,” then a trend toward deterritorialized global life would suggest the decline of geopolitical boundaries (Donnan and Wilson 1998, p. 8). However, the original requirement for the institution may have been replaced by another underlying condition, ensuring the permanence of the institution beyond its original “*sine qua non*.” Below, I argue that this is the case. However, before I can clarify the relation between the ideal and the institution of sovereign territoriality, an understanding of the institution itself is necessary. Thus, I now postpone the question of the obsolescence of borders until much later, in order to explore the changing concept of national boundaries, and to change it once more.

⁶ John Ruggie cites the European Community as a prime example of the territorial “unbundling” (Ruggie 1993, p. 171).

⁷ See Paasi 1999, p. 70-2 and Ohmae 1996, p. 11 for more explicit versions of the typical argument.



Modern political thought has long considered national borders to be lines or regions that, whether visible or invisible, or designated by natural or artificial features, mark the recognized limits of a state's territory and establish a dichotomy of internality/externality through which adjacent polities relate to one another.⁸ Internally, a border designates a domestic space by circumscribing an area of sovereign authority; externally, a border designates a foreign area outside of that sovereignty. This foreign space is usually the domestic space of another sovereign entity; thus, each side of a border is both an inside *and* an outside, relative to the political spaces which it simultaneously joins and separates. As the membrane between inside and outside, a border regulates the cooperative or conflictual contact of domestic and foreign elements.

Importantly, borders also inscribe the populations that inhabit the area which they bound. Consistent with the sovereign territorial ideal, by marking a geographic space of sovereignty, borders define, with some exceptions, the persons who are subject to that sovereignty (in more democratic permutations of the modern state, these persons are also the origin of sovereignty). Borders thus construct the collective political identity, the

⁸ There are, of course, many types of borders. My analysis is primarily concerned with the borders of modern nation-states, although many of its claims could apply, with some adjustment, to spatialized political boundaries at the sub- and superstate levels, including temporary borders such as police lines. For brevity, I sometimes refer to the boundaries of nation-states as 'national borders'; in doing so I intend to refer to the borders of a legal-political *nation-state*, not the borders of a cultural, ethnic or linguistic *nation*. My claims as to the evolving conceptualization of national borders are derived primarily from scholarship in political anthropology and geopolitics, two relatively new academic fields, rather than older traditions in political science and political theory. This is because these newer disciplines give specific attention to *what borders are* and *what borders do* in ways that other fields do not. Despite the recent development of these disciplines, they are by no means ahistorical. For deep historical overviews of the conceptualization of borders, see Anderson 1996, Baud and van Schendel 1997, Borgatta and Montgomery 2001, Paasi 2005b; for overviews of historical iterations of the border concept within twentieth century scholarship, see do Amaral 1994, Donnan and Wilson 1998 and 1999, Newman 2003, 2006a and 2006b, and van Houtum 2005. My claims are derived from a synthesis of these sources. Finally, I use the terms 'border' and 'boundary' interchangeably in order to clarify the contexts of the material I cite. As Henk van Houtum notes, the anthropological referent of 'border' confusingly maps on to the geopolitical term 'boundary' and vice versa; I mix terms in order to keep the referents constant across disciplines (van Houtum 2005, p. 672).

demos or “the people” of a polity. This relatively homogenous identity may not map onto other forms of social or political identity, even those that persons consider to be their primary or most important identity. However, this does not mean that the “we” constructed by borders is merely formal; its significance is proportionate to that of the sovereignty to which it is subject. Additionally, there is much evidence to suggest that geopolitical boundaries contribute significantly to the composition and articulation of other forms of social identity.⁹

This modern account of borders, which was exclusively dominant in Western political thought until the second half of the 20th century, considers borders to be *things*— “limits,” “barriers to social and economic processes,” “lines,” “political membranes,” or “the physical and static outcome of a political decision-making process.”¹⁰ Expanding the classification outlined by contemporary political geographer David Newman, I will call these thing-centered views “traditional” geopolitical accounts of borders (Newman 2006a, p. 172).¹¹ Traditional views consider the thing-ness of borders in a dual light; borders are both the agents of specific activities (i.e., demarcating,

⁹ See, for example, Douglas 1998; Jukarainen 2005; Paasi 1999, 2005a; Sahlin 1998; Villa 2000.

¹⁰ Borgatta and Montgomery 2001, p. 1931; Biger and The International Boundaries Research Unit, 1995, p. 11; Ibid; Donnan and Wilson 1998, p. 9; Newman 2006a p. 175. By ‘thing’ I intend its most common sense in the English language, similar to the senses of ‘object’ or ‘entity’. A thing is ontologically individual. Without plunging into metaphysical theory, I will refer to the second use of the entry “thing” given by the Oxford English Dictionary: “An entity of any kind... That which exists individually (in the most general sense, in fact or in idea); that which is or may be in any way an object of perception, knowledge, or thought; a being, an entity... That which has separate or individual existence; ...A material object, a body; a being or entity consisting of matter, or occupying space” (*OED*, “Thing” II: 7-13). A thing may exist in fact or in idea; thus it need not be material or physical. *What is common to these definitions, however, is its ontological individuality. A thing is distinct from other things, events or acts.*

¹¹ Newman’s review of 20th century border scholarship characterizes “traditionalists among border scholars” as “those whose understanding of borders is synonymous with the physical lines of separation between the States and countries of the international system (Newman 2006a, p. 172). Among these, he includes the geographers Richard Hartshorne, Thomas Holdich, C. Fawcett, A.P. Brigham and Stephen Jones. See also Berg and van Houtum 2003, p. 1-3 for a similar characterization. I intend my use of the term “traditional” to also include any functionalist account of borders that presupposes the existence of the border as an independent thing.

constituting and regulating spaces) and the recipients of other activities (i.e., opening, closing, transgressing or defending). However, what is crucial to traditional views is the convention that *borders, as things, are ontologically distinct from these activities*.

Borders are brought into being, constituted, altered or eliminated by actions, and they perform actions themselves, but they themselves are things, not actions. To employ grammatical terms, traditional geopolitical views considers borders to be exclusively the referents of nouns, and thus the potential subjects and objects of verbs.

In their influential anthropology of borders, Hastings Donnan and Thomas Wilson give a contemporary conceptualization which is typical of traditional geopolitical accounts. They write:

Borders are the political membranes through which people, goods, wealth and information must pass... Thus borders are agents of a state's security and sovereignty, and a physical record of a state's past and present relations with its neighbors. In our view, borders have three elements: the legal borderline which simultaneously separates and joins states; the physical structures of the state which exist to demarcate and protect the borderline, composed of people and institutions which often penetrate deeply into the territory of the state; and frontiers, territorial zones of varying width... (Donnan and Wilson 1998, p. 9).

This conceptualization is significantly more complex than earlier versions of the traditional view, which focus almost exclusively on the first element identified by Donnan and Wilson. Nonetheless, the functions and elements of the border are here too described in terms of things. Also unlike earlier traditional views, the anthropologists take into account the discursive and symbolic productivity of borders when they conclude, "Borders are physical, literal structures of the state, which also structure a range of meanings and belongings associated with various identities" (Donnan and Wilson 1998, p. 25). However, this conclusion retains the basic convention of traditional

geopolitical accounts by considering borders to be *things* first and foremost; borders are structures that *also* structure. As things, Donnan and Wilson's borders are the subjects and objects of activities that are conceptually distinct from the borders themselves.

Traditional accounts of borders such as Donnan and Wilson's begin to give way once the construction, emplacement and maintenance of borders are understood as continually active processes. Like all human artifacts, borders do not simply exist once they are produced. They must be constantly established, maintained, enforced, and enacted if they are to remain real and effective. The border-as-thing cannot exist without these practices, so much so that it becomes difficult to pinpoint where the underlying thing ends and the actions performed by and upon it begin.

Moreover, both the concept and the reality of a border are inseparable from variable sets of institutionalized or habituated practices, meanings and discourses that structure not only the function, maintenance, and enforcement of the border, but also the ways it is experienced and understood by insiders, outsiders and border-crossers. These practices, meanings and discourses constitutively affect the nature of the border itself, suggesting that "the border itself" is a fiction. Thus, a policed border is different from an unpoliced border in terms of what it represents, the ways it is experienced and how it shapes identities on either side of it. Moreover, the same policed border may differ significantly in times of war and times of peace. Similarly, a border's roles and signification change dramatically from periods during which the political identity of the bounded population is stable to those in which its identity is uncertain.¹² In short, borders are socially constructed institutions, which suggests the arbitrariness of any distinction

¹² I have in mind the US's recent surge of anti-immigrant discourse and corresponding legislation, as well as the newly intensified policing of its southern border, all of which followed shortly after the national identity crisis raised by the Hurricane Katrina disaster.

between the thing-ness of a border and the activities and discourses which materially and conceptually construct it.¹³

Consequently, some recent theorizations of borders abandon the traditional geopolitical emphasis on the border as a thing and turn their focus to “the way that borders are socially constructed... managed... and impact our daily life practices” (Newman 2006a, p.172-3). These new conceptualizations—which, for reasons discussed below, I will call “neotraditional” geopolitical views—analyze borders in terms of “*processes* that exist in socio-cultural action and discourses” (Paasi 1999, p. 72). To the neotraditionalist, “The border as a concept is not so much an object or phenomenon, something to erase or install, but rather an ongoing, repetitive process that we encounter and produce ourselves in our daily lives” (Berg and van Houtum 2003, p. 1-2). Whereas traditional accounts held the institution of the border—the individual thing—to be separate from, and analytically prior to, the actions and discourses which surround it, neotraditional accounts refuse to prioritize “border objects” over their “objectification processes” or institutions over their institutionalization (van Houtum et al 2005, p. 3).

In short, according to the neotraditional view, “the border is now understood as a verb in the sense of bordering” (van Houtum 2005, p. 672). Bordering is “the construction, the making of borders,” where borders are understood as “socio-spatially constructed differences” (Ibid, p. 674, 672). This expanded concept of the border entails that bordering “need not be restricted to the entity of states alone;” thus neotraditionalists identify borders and bordering wherever collectivities are structured by formal or informal criteria for membership, even “on the local and micro scales of spatial activity”

¹³ The notion of social construction that I am employing is loosely derived from Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman’s *The Social Construction of Reality*.

(Ibid, p. 674; Newman 2006a, p. 172). In neotraditional theories of borders, geopolitical analysis thus converges with sociology. Newman's recent work on bordering is representative:

Borders exist in almost every aspect of society, categorizing humanity into those who belong to the group... and those who do not... The 'here-there' and 'us-them' cut-off points are not always played out through the construction of physical and visible walls and fences. They may be as invisible as they are tangible and, equally, as perceived as they are real. I define you as belonging to a different social, ethnic, economic or religious group and, as such, I have created a border separating the self from the other (Newman 2006a, p. 176-7).

Newman's emphasis on the social production of borders—as the social production of difference—allows him to theorize a continuity between the macro-level political interactions of states and the micro-level social interactions of individuals.

Neotraditional views such as Newman's address the shortcomings of traditional geopolitical understandings of borders insofar as they theorize the materially and discursively active life of national boundaries. However, they do not completely abandon the traditional emphasis on the border as a thing, even if bordering—as the dynamic construction, negotiation, and impact of this thing—has become the object of theorization. This is because the “border object” and its “objectification processes” remain conceptually dependent upon one another; the concept of the border remains at the heart of the concept of bordering, and vice versa. Thus, when theoretical focus shifts from borders to bordering, from the object to its objectification, or from the institution to its institutionalization, the latter term inherits the ontological independence that is central to traditional accounts of the border-object; hence the designation “*neo-traditional*.” In other words, borders-as-processes continue to be treated as entities that are engendered by the actions of persons but that are conceptually distinct from those actions, functioning

as independent things that can be subjects and objects of new actions. As such, borders-as-bordering occupy the same role in neotraditional theories as borders-as-things do in traditional accounts: they exist, independently, as something *between* social subjects and external to them. To complete the grammatical illustration employed by van Houkum, “the border is now understood as a verb in the sense of bordering,” but the verb corresponds to no subject, and it functions like the noun it has replaced; thus it does not change the overall logical structure or syntax of the theory (van Houkum 2005, p. 672). In short, by treating processes as independent things, the structure of neotraditional theories preserves the traditional thing-ness of the border concept.

This subtle preservation of the border-as-thing in neotraditional accounts is not problematic in itself, but it conflicts with the extension of the bordering concept into everyday social interactions. At the level of geopolitical institutions, the borders that join and separate states *do* seem to be *things*—things that are both materially and discursively constructed, which separate lands and populations into territories and peoples and mediate the interactions of these. Even if we understand state borders as socially constructed processes of differentiation, we treat them as processes that exist between us and our neighbors, simultaneously holding us together and keeping us apart. Hence, neotraditional theories of bordering appear to correctly analyze national borders.

However, such theories become problematic when they analyze the direct social interactions of individuals. Here again, the ontological independence inherited by the bordering process manifests itself as an independent mediator between social subjects, but now this misrepresents the encounter. For example, when Newman, in his account of social bordering, writes, “I define you as belonging to a different social, ethnic, economic

or religious group and, as such, *I have created a border separating the self from the other*,” he introduces a third party to our interaction—a border or bordering process—that performs the act of separation for us (Newman 2006a, p. 176-7, my italics). This description is subtly but importantly mistaken. By placing you in an out-group, *I separate us*; there is nothing between us—no thing I have materially or discursively created, no process that I have initiated—that mediates our interaction for us. Thus, by implicitly conferring the ontological independence of things onto active processes between subjects, neotraditional accounts of borders theoretically displace the *action of interaction* from concrete social actors to a non-existent third-party.

Neotraditional accounts thus fail to adequately theorize the social interactions of concrete subjects. However, this failure is instructive, in that it raises new questions about the operation of political boundaries, questions not yet broached by geopolitical theory or political anthropology. If, as I have just suggested, the theoretical introduction of a *social* border between social subjects appears to displace the agency of their interaction, might not we expect the emplacement of *political* borders between political subjects to affect a similar displacement? Why does it seem intuitive that the interaction of social subjects be unmediated by any external entity, but equally intuitive that the interaction of political subjects be mediated by borders? What is at stake in this difference, and what can it tell us about borders and the individuals and groups on either side of them?

In the next section of this paper, I approach these questions through a philosophical analysis of borders and bordering that inverts the conceptual orientation of the theories discussed above. Whereas contemporary geopolitical theories of borders

extend analyses of state interaction to local, non-state contexts, I will base my own account on ways that individuals negotiate identity, and then extend this to suggest ways that states might. Doing so will allow me to eventually re-approach the sovereign territorial ideal, and its central institution, through a recovery of the concrete individuals that have been overlooked by modern sovereignty's subordination of subjects to space.

Rethinking Bordering and Borders

In this section, I reorient the investigation of national borders by seeking to understand what is at stake in the differences between everyday social bordering and the borders enacted between states. To do so, I will reverse the direction of recent geopolitical thought by attempting to develop a theory of borders out of a theory of bordering. I begin by articulating a new account of bordering that avoids two modern conventions which geopolitical theory rightly ascribes to national borders but wrongly imputes to social bordering: the explicit or implicit emphasis on an ontologically individual and agential *thing* that mediates difference, and the disciplinary emphasis on spatiality that locates difference in some socio-spatial no man's land *between* social or political subjects. In the second half of this section, I develop a theory of national borders out of this purified foundation, so that, in section IV, I can positively indicate the ways in which these conventions attach themselves to our thinking about state borders. Doing so will not only show up the difference between social bordering and state borders; it will also reveal what it is about the latter that makes them surprisingly relevant to our globalizing world. Before specifying a new concept of bordering, however, I need to clarify the theoretical groundwork on which it is constructed.



A basic concept of bordering can be developed from philosophical theories of identity formation via difference. One such theory is elaborated by William Connolly in *Identity/Difference*, where he writes: “An identity is established in relation to a series of differences that have become socially recognized... Identity requires difference in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty” (Connolly 1991, p. 64). Because it depends upon a recognized distinction from whatever it is not, every identity is made possible by what Derrida might call its “constitutive outside.” Inasmuch as identities are always relationally constituted, each contains traces of its other. Additionally, identities are never fixed or final, because the relations between them are never stable; difference is continually constructed and negotiated through ongoing series of “identifications and negations” performed by the persons making “identity claims” (Ibid, p. 199). Consequently, the “self-certainty” to which identities aspire can never be achieved. As Connolly puts it, “Identity is thus a slippery, insecure experience, dependent on its ability to define difference and vulnerable to the tendency of entities it would so define to counter, resist, overturn, or subvert definitions applied to them” (Ibid, p. 64). In other words, identity is always up for grabs.

It is important that this account, while using the language of inside and outside, does not use the language of border, frontier, or line. Unless Connolly is specifically referring to the territorial boundedness of a state, his use of spatial metaphors never posits an entity between inside and outside. In fact, he only employs the language of space or internality and externality to describe ways that selves experience the claims of their own identities in relation to the identities of others, and he constantly breaks down any static distinction between inside and outside (Ibid, p. 40). Inside and outside, then, are not

spaces, but relations that are constantly created and recreated by identities as they negotiate difference (Ibid, p. 160). Crucially, Connolly is careful not to hypostasize such relations, or difference itself, as any sort of *thing* or *process* that mediates identities from an external, in-between space. Rather, he analyses the relations of one identity to another in terms of their own actions; identities are related only by actively including, excluding, distinguishing, negating or identifying with each other's claims (Ibid, p. 65-8, 160-1). In short, identity is constructed through difference, where difference is not a third thing relating two identities, but their unmediated interaction. Identity, then, is not so much a possession or attribute of an individual or collective self, but a series of actions that the self performs upon others and that others perform upon it.

Connolly's theory provides a solid basic account of the negotiation of social identities, but in order to better understand the status of actions like identification, inclusion and exclusion, we need to supplement it.¹⁴ Following Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, we can conceive the constitutive relation of identities vis-à-vis difference as "an articulatory practice which constitutes and organizes social relations... among elements such that their identity is modified" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, p. 96, 105). Central to this idea is the recognition that "articulation is a practice, and not the name of a *given* relational complex," (Ibid, p. 93-4). In other words, identity is actively created in the (potentially antagonistic) discursive interplay of articulatory acts; there are no relations between subjects other than the convergence or collision of their

¹⁴ Another way to enrich this account—a way that I am not yet prepared to undertake—is to incorporate the psychoanalytic concept of identification developed in Freud and Lacan. I want to mark this for future exploration, because I believe importing psychoanalytic theory would in some ways deepen the conclusions of my paper.

articulations.¹⁵ In this context, “discursive” should not be taken to mean merely linguistic or idealistic; Laclau and Mouffe’s analysis rejects any “distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices,” as well as “any distinction between what are usually called the linguistic and behavioural aspects of a social practice,” by affirming that “every object is constituted as an object of discourse, insofar as no object is given outside every discursive condition of emergence,” including the rejected distinctions (Ibid, p. 107-8). Finally, in a way that both anticipates and deepens Connolly’s claim that identity is “slippery” and “insecure,” Laclau and Mouffe clarify that articulatory practice is never complete; neither the total discursive ensemble of identities, nor the constitution of any single identity, are ever fully fixed (Ibid, p. 110-1). Consequently, every identity must be constantly articulated if it is to maintain any coherence, and therefore it must continually re-relate to other identities through the active negotiation of difference.¹⁶

Drawing on the theoretical work of Connolly, Laclau and Mouffe, I propose that bordering is the discursive practice of articulating difference through which identities are unceasingly formed, deformed and reformed. Here, difference is not a thing or relationship between two identities (i.e., difference is not *a* difference), but the necessary mode of any interaction of any numerically non-identical entities. Difference is inherent in plurality; as such, it is in itself neither divisive nor integrative. Thus, whether identities are brought together or kept apart, and whether they are cooperative or antagonistic, does not depend on difference, but its articulation. The articulation of

¹⁵ Hence, Laclau and Mouffe’s use of the phrase “subject positions” is potentially misleading. The positions in question are defined through articulatory practices and are more like positions on a issue than spatial positions (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, p. 109).

¹⁶ In an article written by Laclau and Lillian Zac, this thought is illuminatingly expressed in psychoanalytic terms: “As any identification takes place through contents which are essentially inadequate to this fulfillment, the identification will be constitutively incomplete and will have to be always recreated through new identification acts” (Laclau and Zac 1994, p. 16).

difference occurs, on the one hand, in the act of claiming recognition for any identity and, on the other hand, in the acts of accepting, rejecting or ignoring, identifying with or differentiating from, and including or excluding such claims. It is the active orientation of oneself to the identity of another. Thus, articulations of difference neither create something new nor manipulate something already existing; other than the identities of the interacting subjects, there is no other *thing* involved. Consequently, bordering is not the construction of something between subjects, but the direct interaction of subjects via discursive acts of identification and differentiation.

Several features of this account must be elaborated. First, neither claims to recognition, nor the responses to them, need be explicit or conscious. Identities are constantly interacting, cooperating, competing, provoking, petitioning and impinging upon one another. Often, we are not aware of the ways our own identity interacts with others. We usually do not register all of the claims we make, the significance that our presence has for others, or the ways in which we are read by them. In particular, we frequently do not recognize the violence that our identity claims do to others; likewise, others may not recognize the violence we do to them. Similarly, we rarely respond to the claims of others consciously, and these responses are often unconsciously interpreted. Consequently, much of the bordering that we do on a day-to-day basis happens without our explicit knowledge of it. For instance, we border others not only when we actively discriminate against them, but also when we are unable to see them, or to hear their claims. We border when we size each other up and consciously or unconsciously evaluate each other. We border through the ways we present ourselves and perceive others, through body language, attitudes, and the beliefs we hold. Every component of

our identities is shaped through bordering, and bordering occurs in every interaction of our identities.

Second, bordering occurs not only in the interaction of individual identities, but also in the active interplay of collective identities. The identity of a group forms through the internal interactions of in-group identities, as well as the interactions between in-group and out-group identities. In fact, the same can be said of the identity of an individual, once it is recognized that individual identity is constituted out of competing claims that interact within the same person. Internal and external bordering is therefore common to both individuals and groups, and there is continuity between the way individual and collective identities are formed. Third, despite this continuity, bordering need not make reference to any collective identity at all. Bordering need not be, as Newman has it in his example, a matter of sorting individuals into groups or separating a self from other against a larger background of 'us' and 'them'. The articulation of difference can be, and usually is, intimate and specific, without invoking patterns of discrimination, inclusion and exclusion or the negotiation of collective identities.

Fourth, bordering is not exclusive to face-to-face interactions. Articulations of difference can happen at a distance, or when the other is present to the self only as a memory, an anticipation, an idea, or a prejudice. This suggests that, fifth, bordering may be based on identities or interactions with identities that do not exist. Bordering may happen on the grounds of a misperceived identity claim, on a misunderstood interaction, or even as the interaction with a fictional, nonexistent identity. This last possibility happens most often when identities are distorted, exaggerated, or made-up, as in racist imagination or nationalist propaganda. Importantly, this is most likely in contexts of

pervasive faith, hope or fear, such as when a sect orients itself toward a mythological savior, or a nation orients itself toward an imaginary or exaggerated threat.

Sixth, bordering is not an exclusively divisive activity. Articulations of difference can be positive as well as negative, approving as well as disapproving. In fact, difference, as a mode of interaction, is a necessary condition for approval, admiration, attraction, appreciation, and all other positive orientations to an other. The same is true for all negative orientations to others. Nonetheless, bordering does not lend itself to the latter more than the former; bordering joins as well as separates individual and collective subjects.

Finally, bordering is an imminently social activity, and because humans are social creatures (either by nature or by convention), we are bordering creatures. In only extreme and extremely rare cases are humans ever fully alone; the overwhelming majority of human beings live social lives, speak shared languages, or employ common conceptual categories. As such, difference is a mode of living that does not expire, and it is articulated constantly, in every one of our interactions. As non-identical subjects who are continually, in some way, in the presence of others, human beings are bordering beings.

* * *

The fully elaborated concept of bordering can now be used to analyze the phenomenon of state borders. As discussed above, modern thought identifies several key functions of such borders: they manifest a relationship of inside/outside that simultaneously constitutes and differentiates a state; they bound a population and regulate the inclusion and exclusion of potential community members so as to create and sustain a common political identity; and they designate the difference between the familiarly

domestic and the foreign or alien. Each of these functions can now be understood as the articulation of difference; the functions ascribed to national borders are operations of identification and differentiation by which the members of nation-states articulate their collective political identities vis-à-vis other identities. *Borders are thus instances of bordering.* As such, they are not individual objects or independent processes that exist *between* subjects and mediate them; nor are borders the *production* of such entities. Rather, borders *simply are* the direct and reciprocal bordering interactions of multiple identities upon one another. Through the practice of bordering, relationships of internality/externality emerge, political identities are constituted, and spheres of domesticity and foreignness are demarcated—but these functions are effects of the bordering activity of particular individuals and groups, not the operations of independently existing things or processes.

The subjects of this bordering activity are the individuals and groups commonly thought of as being “on either side” of the border. However, this spatial language is misleading. It is more correct to say that the bordering subjects are all of those identities that participate in the bordering interaction—all of the subjects and objects of identity claims who are simultaneously the objects and subjects of the responses to these claims.¹⁷ As mentioned above, these subjects do not have to confront one another directly; rather, it is enough that their identities be invoked in the interaction.

On this account, borders are analyzed as instances of bordering activity, but not every articulation of difference is a border. Rather, borders are ensembles of coordinated articulations, and it is the density of these ensembles that sets borders apart from the rest

¹⁷ Of course, subjects are constantly articulating difference simultaneously with multiple others, so any language of claim and *then* response is a little misleading. Temporally, these two apparently distinct moments should be collapsed.

of the bordering discourse. The ensembles are not more than their component articulations. They are simply a plurality of equivalent articulations that are coordinated, not by some relation, agent, or operation external or prior to them, but by virtue of their discursive equivalence.¹⁸ In other words, the ensembles are an effect of the frequent repetition, interrelation and interchangeability of particular identity claims, responses and counter-claims made by a plurality of subjects. Borders, to put it roughly, are ensembles of bordering acts that are “about” similarly and interrelatedly articulated difference.

Because national-political identities can be negotiated through claims that appeal to formal and universalist categories (i.e., the category of citizenship, or the equal protection of all persons), the acts of bordering that negotiate these identities can achieve an especially high degree of equivalence. Moreover, the state has the resources—for example, in the form of shared media, propaganda, and national languages, traditions and histories—to encourage the same discursive equivalence through particularist categories (i.e., via nationalism and patriotism). Thus, bordering activity that articulates difference in terms of national-political identities tends to achieve discursive equivalence more easily than other instances of bordering. As a result, articulations of national-political identity make up the majority of the ensembled activity that is a border. However, articulations of other forms of identity are coordinated in the ensemble as well, and these both shape and are shaped by the articulations of national-political identity. Thus, the Mexico-US border is the ensemble of conscious and unconscious claims of particular subjects to be recognized as not only as Mexican or US citizens, but also as North American, Spanish-speaking, English-speaking, Latina, Caucasian, raised in the United

¹⁸ For a more technical elaboration of the notion of discursive equivalence I am employing, see the preface and third chapter of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). Equivalence is not a relation that is prior or external to specific discursive articulations.

States, born in Chiapas, nationalistic, racist, atheist, Protestant, Catholic, Chicana, etc.

The ensemble also includes the discursive acts of accepting, rejecting, differentiating and identifying with these claims. Despite the diversity of the ensemble, articulations of national-political identity play the dominant role in the discursive life of the border; they exercise hegemony over other articulations within the ensembled bordering activity.¹⁹

Geographic location is a central component of standard concepts of national borders, and any reconceptualization of borders must feature a homologous component. The present account analyzes geographic location in terms of discursive localization through the equivalence of particular articulations of difference. Thus, the ensemble of discursive activity that is the Mexico-US border is localized by the patterned valence of equivalent acts, rather than the distribution of geographic space.²⁰ Moreover, it is important to recall that, as Laclau and Mouffe have claimed, discourse includes the creation, arrangement and manipulation of material structures, inasmuch as these are socially constructed structures in addition to sheer physical presences (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, p. 108). Thus, the walls, fences, rivers, mountain ranges, checkpoints and welcome signs that make up the material life of borders are as much a part of the bordering discourse as are the hesitation, intolerance, welcoming acceptance, glares, prejudices and silencing with which subjects respond to identity claims. Although acts of bordering are not always locatable in geographic space, the material elements of the bordering discourse are, and it is to these that we usually refer when we locate, for

¹⁹ The notion of hegemony that I intend is elaborated below, on pages 29-31, although in a different context. There I discuss the hegemony that the ensemble *as a whole* exercises over a multiplicity of uncoordinated articulations of difference. A homologous organization is present within the ensemble itself.

²⁰ This is confirmed by remarks by Balibar, Donnan and Wilson, and Paasi that all recognize the dispersion of borders throughout and across territories, in addition to their geographic concentration at the physical limits of sovereign territory (Balibar 2004; Donnan and Wilson 1998; Paasi 2005a).

example, the Mexico-US border between the towns of El Paso and Ciudad Juárez. The Mexico-US border also exists, of course, in a dispersion of sites, from the physical immigration desks at J.F.K International Airport to wherever Mexican and US identity claims are negotiated, including fictional environments and cyberspace. Thus, we should understand the geographic location of the border as shorthand for sites of densely coordinated discursive activity.

Finally, because national borders are coordinated ensembles of discursive activity, rather than individual or independent things, no form of agency can be ultimately attributed to them. Borders cannot actually be “agents of a state’s security and sovereignty,” nor can they be accurately described as “separating the self from the other,” distinguishing nations, constituting a people, defining a sphere of sovereignty or differentiating between the familiar and the alien (Donnan and Wilson 1998, p. 9; Newman 2006a, p. 177). All of these claims must be analyzed as shorthand for the underlying truth that is revealed in the present account of borders-as-bordering: *that the concrete subjects of the bordering discourse—persons, not institutions, objects or processes—are themselves the agents of the state* that separate the self from other, distinguish nations, constitute peoples, define the range of sovereign authority and adjudicate between the familiar and the alien. As bordering subjects, we—*all of us*—perform these operations through our explicit and implicit identity claims, and through our conscious and unconscious responses to the identity claims of others. The activities traditionally ascribed to national borders, then, are in fact never done for us by entities that mediate our interactions. Nor are they the exclusive prerogative of authorities that

are sanctioned to legislate, administer, or enforce border operations. *Rather, borders—as acts of bordering—are done by us, to others, and vice versa.*



The analysis of borders in terms of bordering is now complete, and it shows that there exists a continuity between the phenomena of national borders and the everyday acts of inclusion, exclusion, identification and unification through which individuals and groups constitute their identities. For example, there is a continuity between the bordering that occurs when the long-term residents of my neighborhood regard potential gentrifiers with suspicion, and the bordering that occurs when the citizens of my country, in order to preserve our current national self-image, lock down its southern border and turn away migrant workers. In both cases, the identity of the community is reinforced through the acts of differentiation or exclusion with which it negotiates the identity claims of potential members. Thus my neighbors, by sizing up newcomers and distinguishing between “us” and “them,” reinforce their real or ideal image of themselves as the Maxwell Heights community. Likewise the citizens of the United States, by criminalizing the undocumented flow of labour into the nation’s area of sovereignty, reinforce a real or ideal image of the working ‘American’ and ‘American’ citizen.²¹ In short, because instances of bordering at any level involve the negotiation of two or more identities *vis-à-vis* articulations of difference, the ensembles of bordering activity that are national borders are continuous with the local or intimate acts with which individuals directly negotiate their personal and collective identities.

²¹ An excellent illustration of this is the explicit link between US immigration controls and the identity of the ‘American’ (i.e., US) middle class in the Federation for American Immigration Reform’s press release, “Bush Immigration Speech Calls for Same Old Illegal Alien Amnesty and Guest Worker Program, Says the Federation for American Immigration Reform,” April 9, 2007. Available at http://www.fairus.org/site/PageServer?pagename=media_release4092007. Accessed 07/27/2007.

However, this continuity conflicts with common ways of speaking and thinking about national borders and, as indicated in section II, with theoretical analyses of state boundaries. Borders do not *seem* to be of a kind with our quotidian negotiations of identity; they do not even seem to be the actions of particular subjects. They seem like things, institutions or processes that are ontologically distinct from our own or anyone else's bordering activity. Moreover, in contrast to what I have said above, borders appear to be institutional agents that, in political contexts, perform bordering activity *for us*. In other words, if indeed borders are our own actions, our agency is unrecognizable in them.

In the next section, I will attempt to explain why national borders, but not other instances of bordering, appear as independent and agential things that exist between – and act upon—political subjects. First, I argue that borders appear as if they are *outside* of the bordering discourse because of their hegemonic position *within* it. Additionally I will suggest that processes of alienation, objectification and abstraction are responsible for the independent and agential appearance of national borders in theoretical and popular political discourse, as well as for the occlusion of the particular bordering activities of concrete subjects. In the fifth and final section of this paper, I will argue that these processes are at the heart of the very *modern* relevance of state borders to our so-called *postmodern* age. Before beginning these arguments, however, I will again develop the necessary theoretical concepts out of the work of other thinkers. This time my sources are two surprisingly relevant philosophers of the birth and (potential) death of the modern state: Machiavelli and Marx.

The Unfinished Modernity of Bordered Life

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli exhorts Lorenzo de' Medici to unite the disparate population of feudal Italy into a singular and coherent "people." The population cannot unify itself; it must be interpellated as a collective political identity by an authority who appears to stand outside of it (Machiavelli 1998, p. 102-5). The prince who would rule Italy, then, must be recognized as *external* to and *independent* of the mass of individuals that he transforms into a collective identity (Ibid p. 17, 55, 97). The majority of Machiavelli's text is dedicated to recommending how the prince might achieve this recognition by means of superiority and distinction founded upon "his own power and virtue" (Ibid p. 31).²²

However, Machiavelli constantly troubles the externality and independence of his prince, even as he stresses their importance. In the Dedicatory Letter, he describes the separation of the prince from the vulgar as analogous to the position of a mountain over a valley—they are continuous with one another rather than absolutely distinct, and this continuity is the condition of each position (Ibid, p. 4). Additionally, the same passage introduces a central theme of Machiavelli's work: the prince is the constant object of the people's regard and, because "men in general judge more by their eyes than by their hands," ruling them will require manipulating their vision (Ibid, p. 70-1, 4, 87, 91). Indeed, the prince's virtue is predominantly a manufactured semblance (Ibid 70-1). More importantly, the prince's power is only apparently his own. Machiavelli repeatedly stresses that the prince's dominion relies, not upon his own strength, but upon that of his subjects. These particular subjects—the Italians who are themselves "superior in force,

²² The pairing of superiority and distinction is intentionally ambiguous: superiority suggests a continuity that must be the limit of distinction, and distinction suggests a difference that limits the significance of superiority. A negotiation of these is central to the hegemonic relation Machiavelli theorizes.

dexterity and ingenuity”—constitute the prince's superiority by pledging allegiance to him, displacing their power (*potenzia*: potential, ability) to his person (Ibid, 102-4). The prince is thus obligated to the masses for their power, and he must continually remain in their favor (Ibid, p. 18-9, 31-3, 37, 39, 40-2, 44, 55, 72, 79, 103). Consequently, the prince's apparent superiority and distinction—the manifestations of his externality and independence—are achieved only through his obligation to the population. This undermines any actual externality or independence. The prince is not external to the population, nor is he independent of it. He is, rather, a privileged member of the population who, as a condition of this privilege, is dependent on the rest of the population for the image of his independence. This is the truth that the vulgar must not realize if the prince's interpellation of “the people” is to be effective.

The fictive externality and independence of Machiavelli's prince provides a schema that can be used to understand the apparent separation of political borders from other operations of bordering. Machiavelli theorizes (and hopes to bring about) the transformation of a disparate multiplicity of agents into a coherent collective identity. This change is to be affected by a hegemonic agent who, through its relation to the subaltern multiplicity, is able to organize the latter into a unity. The agent appears, by virtue of its hegemony, to be separate from, external to and independent of the multiplicity over which hegemony is exercised. In fact, as Machiavelli subtly stresses, the multiplicity participates in the agent's hegemony, and the agent participates in the multiplicity's subalternity. The agent is thus not external to the multiplicity, but occupies a hegemonic position within it. Its apparent externality, however, is the condition and

consequence of its hegemony, which organizes the other elements of the multiplicity into a subaltern unity.

The logic of hegemony present in Machiavelli's thought indicates how some instances of bordering activity—national borders—can appear to be external to the entirety of the bordering discourse. As explained above, a border is a coordinated ensemble of equivalent bordering operations within a multiplicity (or multiplicities) of uncoordinated acts of bordering. The ensemble is distinguished from the rest of the multiplicity by virtue of its coordination and density (i.e., by virtue of the degree of equivalence and the number or frequency of ensembled equivalent acts). The manifestation of this distinction is the dichotomous organization of the whole multiplicity along a central relation of hegemonic-subaltern (i.e., coordinated-uncoordinated), wherein the disparate bordering operations are all equally subaltern in their relation to the hegemonic ensemble.²³ This organization has two primary effects.

First, the hegemonic ensemble to some degree organizes the subaltern operations, not only around their equal subalternity, but also around equivalent acts of identification and differentiation. In other words, borders motivate toward equivalence both the positions and the specific content of other bordering operations within multiplicities. We might say that the hegemonic ensembles align the valence of the diverse subaltern

²³ Importantly, the entirety of discourse is organized into many such dichotomies, some of which overlap or are nested within others. There are, of course, a plurality of national borders, which sometimes overlap or nest (as in the case of embassies, diplomatic immunity and military bases). It may be clarifying to think of the totality of discourse in terms of regions, wherein different hegemonic organizations occur. I do not want to commit myself to this image, however, because I am wary of spatializing discourse, and I am even more hesitant to impose a geopolitical template onto a conceptualization of discourse itself. I have opted to speak of “multiplicities” of varying sizes rather than regions, and I use the phrases “the entirety of discourse” or “the bordering discourse itself” to indicate the totality of multiplicities. Borders organize multiplicities into relations of hegemonic-subaltern; they do not organize the entirety of the bordering discourse. Nonetheless, their position within a hegemonically organized multiplicity makes them appear to be, not only separate from that multiplicity, but also something other than bordering activity—i.e., outside of the entirety of the bordering discourse.

articulations of difference.²⁴ Crucially, this has the effect of reinforcing the hegemony of the ensemble; the border “grows” through the aligned participation of the organized subaltern bordering operations.

Second, the bifurcated organization of the multiplicity into hegemonic and subaltern operations gives the appearance that the coordinated ensemble is separate from (i.e., external to and independent of) the diverse bordering activities that are organized around their equal subalternity. This is because the subaltern operations appear to be the entirety of the multiplicity, while the ensemble, thanks to its hegemonic status within the multiplicity, appears to be external to it. The particular hegemonic status of the ensemble, in relation to the equivalent status that pervades the multiplicity, gives the impression that it is not only outside the multiplicity but, moreover, that the ensemble is *something other than* the bordering operations that make up the multiplicity. Thus, it appears to be outside of the bordering discourse itself. In other words, national borders appear to the subjects of uncoordinated bordering activity just as the prince appears to the masses—as a superior and distinct agent that is involved in activity completely unlike their own.²⁵

In short, Machiavelli theorizes a relation of hegemony that enables us to understand the apparent externality of borders to the bordering *discourse*, not as a consequence of the commonly assumed thing-ness of borders, but as an effect of the organization of bordering activity itself. However, in order to fully clarify the relation of borders to bordering, and to reconcile the present account with common understandings

²⁴ As political geography and anthropology have shown, national borders have a strong influence on the social, political and economic identities of individuals who reside in borderlands, frontiers and even the interior of bordered territories (Douglas 1998; Jukarainen 2005; Paasi 1999, 2005a; Sahlins 1998; Villa 2000).

²⁵ Regarding the pairing of “superior” and “distinct,” see note 22, above.

of borders, we need to also understand the apparent separation of national borders from the bordering *subject*. Here, Machiavelli is of no help, as his work does not comprehend the separability of agent and act. Thus, we need to move beyond Machiavelli, to Marx, who makes this separation central to his revolutionary political thought.



In his early work, Marx theorizes the separation of the worker from the product of her labor as a process of violent alienation. Crucially, alienation is not simply a matter of expropriation. Rather, Marx's concept describes the way that, in a specific economic, social and political context, a worker's own activity turns back against her:

The *alienation* of the worker in his object means not only that his labour becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently, as a something alien to him, and that it becomes a power of its own confronting him; it means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien (Marx 1978c, p. 72).

This confrontation is not the result of anything particular to the form of labor or the product itself. Rather, it is a necessary effect of the capitalist organization of life, in which the worker becomes steadily poorer relative to the wealth she produces for others. Importantly, productive activity itself is also alienated from the worker: "If then the product of labour is alienation, production itself must be active alienation, the alienation of activity, the activity of alienation" (Ibid, p. 73). In other words, the act itself is separated from the agent; it is "external" to her, it "neither depends on nor belongs to" her, and it bears no trace of her particular agency (Ibid, p. 74-5). Alienated activity thus confronts the subject who begets it as independent, subject-less activity.

In his later work, Marx develops the concept of alienation into a new account of objectification, which describes the apparent transformation of active social relations into

“objects [that] are independent of the workers whom they *dominate*” (Marx 1990, p. 1054). For Marx, social relationality is a mode of activity, and social relations are not hypostatized relationships, but the active interactions of social subjects.²⁶

Objectification, then, transforms an *activity* or mode of activity into an independent, autonomous *thing*. Marx writes:

The social character of activity, as well as the social form of the product, and the share of individuals in production here appear as something alien and objective, confronting the individuals, not as their relation to one another, but as their subordination to relations which subsist independently of them and which arise out of the collisions between mutually indifferent individuals (Marx 1973, p. 157)

Through objectification, sociality itself—no matter whether it is manifested in the social nature of an activity, product or person—appears as “something alien to them, autonomous, as a thing” (Ibid). Whereas *alienated* social activity confronts individuals as a subject-less process, *objectified* social activity confronts them as an autonomous subject, capable of acting on other things and, in particular, capable of actively oppressing the concrete subject whose reified sociality it is.

Importantly, the objectification of sociality does not leave the social subject unchanged. Rather, it appears to strip the subject of her social agency. Thus, the separation of activity and agent via objectification is a double movement. On the one hand, it transforms the agent’s sociality into an apparently independent thing, capable of acting on its own and even dominating the agent. On the other hand, it transforms the agent herself into an asocial non-agent, one of the “mutually indifferent individuals” who collide rather than interact (Ibid). Thus, objectification is both the “personification of things and the reification [*Versachlichung*] of persons” (Marx 1990, p. 1054). It is, in

²⁶ Thus, in the passage from the *Grundrisse* quoted below, the *relation* of individuals to one another—i.e., their active interactions—appear as *relations* between them—i.e., inactive and independent things.

short, a separation of agent and activity that displaces social agency from the former to the latter.

The concepts of alienation and objectification can be used to explain the apparent separation of national borders—as instances of bordering activity—from the subjects of that activity. The latter concept also makes sense of the apparent thing-ness and agency of borders.²⁷ As alienated or objectified instances of bordering activity, borders appear to be anonymous and autonomous processes or things that confront the subjects who ultimately engender them. In the latter case, they also appear to monopolize the activity of bordering, doing the work of separating, distinguishing and constituting political identities and communities themselves. Thus, in their confrontation with objectified bordering activity, bordering subjects appear as *bordered* subjects, whose communities and identities are the products of asocial, agential, impersonal and independent institutions, rather than the dynamic outcomes of their own activity.

This analysis of borders as alienated or objectified bordering activity is very similar to Marx's early critiques of the modern state, the details of which will complete the present exploration of the apparent separation of borders from the bordering subject. In his critique of *The Philosophy of Right*, Marx famously inverts Hegel's claim that the state, as a stage in the development of the ideal subject of history, produces the family and civil society through its own activity. Lambasting Hegel's idealism, Marx writes, "Family and civil society constitute *themselves* as the state. They are the driving force...

²⁷ The concept of *alienation* can be used to explain the way borders are conceived by neotraditional geopolitical theories: as the alienated bordering activity of concrete subjects, borders appear as independent, *subject-less processes* that occur between and mediate the interactions of individuals and groups. The concept of *objectification* can be used to explain the way borders are conceived by traditional geopolitical theories and popular discourse: as the objectified activity of concrete subjects, borders appear as independent, *agential things* that stand between and act upon individuals and groups.

The fact is that the state issues from the multitude... As if the actual state were not the people. The state is an abstraction. The people alone are what is concrete” (Marx 1978a, p. 17-8). The state, as the objectified activity of the concrete multitude, presents itself as an independent sphere of universal subjectivity over and against civil society, which is reduced to the sphere of particular subjects. As with Machiavelli's prince, this independence is only apparent. The state in fact requires and presupposes the private sphere, inasmuch as its image of universality can only be manifested in opposition to the particularity of concrete individuals and their actions (Marx 1978b, p. 33).

However, Marx goes beyond Machiavelli by theorizing the way in which the state—as an *abstraction*—obscures the concrete activity out of which it arises.²⁸ Whereas the prince’s person and station exude particularity in the form of perceived distinction and apparent superiority, the state legislates such particularity away from itself “when it decrees that birth, social rank, education, occupation are *non-political* distinctions; when it proclaims... that every member of society is an *equal* partner in popular sovereignty” (Ibid). Because hegemony is no longer based on an image of particularity, but on an aspiration toward universality, the state presents itself as a community in which all are equal participants. However, this constant profession of universality hides the fact that the state is ultimately the objectified activity of concrete, particular subjects. The state stands over this concrete particularity as an abstract community, and subjects participate in it—indeed, they depend upon it—only as abstract, legal citizens, rather than as

²⁸ Abstraction and the issue of universality are modern phenomena not found in monarchical regimes, wherein the sovereign is concrete and hegemony is explicitly predicated upon particularity (i.e., the prince’s appearance, his virtue, his legacy of deeds, etc). In such regimes, the subalterns misrecognize the particular hegemonic element as completely unlike them. In modern states, in the presence of a universal hegemonic element, they misrecognize themselves.

particular individuals (Ibid, p. 34). Thus, the “abstraction of *the state as such*” and “the abstraction of private life” are concurrent in modern society (Marx 1978a, p. 22).²⁹

This double abstraction not only hides the antagonistic particularity from which the state arises, it also conceals the particular antagonisms that remain active beneath and even through the state’s fictive universality. On one hand, the banishment of conflictual particularity to the private sphere ensures the necessity and the legitimation of the state as a space of neutrality over and above civil society. On the other hand, it ensures that the state cannot actually play this role, as the dominant elements of civil society also dominate the state apparatus, aided by its pretenses of universality (Marx 1978b, p. 33-4; Marx 1978d, p. 187). In short, the abstract nature of the modern state obscures the actions of concrete individuals while transforming the objectified activity of all into the hegemony of some.

Borders share the pretense to universality manifested in the entirety of the state apparatus. They too function as abstractions, eschewing particularity in their operations by aspiring to be unprejudiced, objective processes. In doing so, they force a kind of abstraction upon the subjects who interact with them—each is viewed only as an actual or potential community member, a citizen or non-citizen, or the holder of a domestic or foreign passport, rather than a concrete person. As abstractions, borders occlude the bordering discourse of which they are a part and disavow their condition as the alienated and objectified interactions of concrete subjects. Thus, the social, subjective and thoroughly particular activity of articulating difference, as well as the concrete subjects of

²⁹ Etienne Balibar puts this clearly: “The universalization of particularity is the compensation for the constitution of the State, a fictive community whose power of abstraction compensates for the real lack of community between individuals” (Balibar 1995, p. 48). It must be remembered that, for Marx, the “real lack of community” is an effect of the capitalist organization of life and, in particular, the state’s sanction of this organization in civil society.

bordering activity, are concealed by the appearance that borders negotiate identity themselves. Nonetheless, particularity continues to operate, deviously and powerfully, in the social interactions covered over by the abstract institution, including those that occur through or in the name of the institution itself.³⁰



As philosophers of the birth and (potential) death of the modern state, Machiavelli and Marx provide the intellectual foundations necessary to understand the central institution of territorial sovereignty *without* reference to political-geographical territoriality. In section III, I theorized borders as operations of bordering activity continuous with the everyday acts of social bordering performed by social subjects. This continuity, I suggested, conflicts with common understandings of borders as agential things that exist and operate independently of the activity of bordering subjects. In this section, I have drawn from Machiavelli to argue that national borders are indeed articulations of difference within the bordering discourse; however, thanks to their hegemonic status within this discourse, they appear to be external to it. Thus, while borders appear to be different from the everyday activity of bordering with which we constitute our individual and collective identities, they are in fact the most successful instances of this activity.

Drawing from Marx, I have proposed that national borders are alienated and objectified instances of bordering activity. As such, the social character of this activity has been obscured, and the activity itself appears as a border-object separate from the individuals who originally performed it. Moreover, the agential autonomy endowed by

³⁰ In different ways, Gloria Anzaldúa, Nevzat Soguk and Pablo Villa vividly illustrate the complicated weave of universality and particularity in both the transgression and enforcement of the Mexico-US border (Anzaldúa 1999; Soguk 1996; Villa 2000).

objectification creates the impression that borders act upon these individuals, defining their communities and collective identities for them. Finally, I have proposed that borders function as abstractions that obscure their origins in the articulations of difference performed by concrete bordering subjects, thereby concealing their own status as hegemonic, alienated, objectified and abstracted activity. This allows them to covertly privilege the particular bordering operations of some concrete subjects while overtly aspiring to the equal treatment of all. For all of these reasons, we commonly think, speak and act as if borders are things that we can act upon, and which act upon us, rather than things we do.

Throughout this discussion, I have put significant stress on the notions of appearance and semblance, arguing that borders are not what they seem—or, more faithfully, that they seem what they are not—as if being and seeming could be easily untangled. In the present context, they can be untangled, but not easily. Despite major differences, my analysis shares with neotraditional geopolitical theories the broad claim that national borders are, one way or another, effects of discursive activity. This implies that there is no extra-discursive essence of borders; they *really are* what they are in discourse—that is, in the linguistic, behavioral, ideal and material practices and interactions of social subjects.

This does not mean that borders are necessarily only what they appear to some or all subjects; the discursive life of borders is not exhausted by the ways that subjects explicitly and consciously understand, talk about, or intentionally act toward them. Nonetheless, the ways that borders appear to subjects—and the ways that subjects, in relation to borders, appear to themselves—have inestimable impact on the organization of

social discourse. Thus, the ways that borders appear are a significant part of what is real about them, and, more broadly, about bordered life. Theodor Adorno puts the general point very well when he writes, “Yet such pure appearance is the *ens realissimum* in the immediate life of men. The force of gravity of social relationships serves only to strengthen that appearance more and more” (Adorno 1969, p. 151-2). Appearance, on Adorno’s account and mine, is neither unreal nor wrong; it is not an illusion to be dispelled. Rather, through its supremely powerful influence in the organization of life, appearance is woven into—and continues to weave itself into—the social fabric that is reality.

Thus, in opposing the way borders appear with a new account of what they are, I do not expect to negate, dispel or disprove their appearance. Nor do I mean to trivialize it. Rather, I mean to indicate that, even in social discourse, that which appears does not exhaust all that is real. Thus, the critical intent of my project has not been to replace appearance with reality, but to uncover social forces, practices and ways of being that are obscured by that which appears, but which nevertheless shape reality and the ways it is lived. In other words, my claims about borders—the ways they appear and what they are—are not intended to be either purely descriptive or purely corrective. They are meant to be diagnostic.

The ways that national borders appear in theoretical and everyday discourse can be read as symptoms of alienation, objectification and abstraction at work in our ways of understanding and living life in common. Orienting the analyses of borders and bordering this way, we can return to the questions raised at the end of section II. There, the inadequacy of neotraditional theories was revealed in their failure to account for an

asymmetry between, on the one hand, intuitive understandings of collective negotiations of national-political identity and, on the other, those of individual negotiations of social identity. The asymmetry can now be accounted for: alienation, objectification and abstraction affect the bordering of national-political identities more so than they affect that of other forms of identity. To put it differently, the above analyses have revealed that the articulation of difference in terms of national-political identity is alienated, objectified and abstracted in ways that other articulations of difference are not. Thus, the thing-ness of the border-object seems appropriate to negotiations of national-political collective identity, but not to other forms of bordering.

This indicates that alienation, objectification and abstraction are not intrinsic to the activity of bordering itself. Rather, they are an effect of social discourse more broadly, i.e., of a particular arrangement of social conditions and ways of living. Thus, the reason that these processes affect the bordering of national-political identity, rather than of other forms of identity, can only be found in the particular makeup of actual social discourse, just as Marx could only explain the specificity of alienated industrial labor by examining capitalist society more generally.

At this point, then, the present analyses of borders and bordering opens up to a deeper and broader question for further diagnosis: What is it about our social lives and social selves such that the processes of alienation, objectification and abstraction have come to operate in our discursive treatment of national borders specifically, and, more broadly, in our ways of understanding and negotiating national-political identities? In other words, having identified symptoms of these processes in common ways of conceptualizing and living bordered life, the diagnosis can inquire as to their origins.

What is it about ourselves and society, we might ask, that is responsible for the alienation, objectification and abstraction of our national-political bordering activity?

The present inquiry is not the occasion to attempt an answer to the questions it has just posed. Understanding the causes of these processes would require extensive sociological, historical, psychological, psychoanalytic, political scientific and discourse analytic investigations that I am not prepared to undertake. However, the diagnostic endeavor can take another critical track, by further elaborating what is at stake in the processes that it has revealed. Rather than looking backward for causes, in the final section of this paper I will begin where the foregoing analyses conclude—with a recognition of the facticity of alienation, objectification and abstraction—and inquire as to the further impact and influence of these processes on our social selves and social lives. The conclusions of this inquiry will finally enable a reformulation and resolution to the question of the obsolescence of national borders in contemporary global life.

The Suppression of the Subject and the Contemporary Function of Borders

Thus far, the aim of my paper has been to show that national borders are ensembles of bordering activity—the discursive articulation of difference—that do not appear as such, thanks to processes of alienation, objectification and abstraction that have separated this activity from other operations of bordering and, most importantly, from the bordering subjects themselves. These processes do not affect all bordering activity; they are generally limited to that which articulates difference in terms of two or more national-political identities. Moreover, alienation, objectification and abstraction are not isolated distortions of consciousness, but are, as I have suggested, the material effects of a

specific organization of social life and the way it is lived by social subjects. As such, they in turn deeply affect the structures of society and social lives.

The most significant effect of these processes is the eclipse of concrete bordering subjects by the anonymous, autonomous and abstract institution of national borders in the discursive negotiation of national-political identities. Where two or more such identities interact, this interaction appears as the mediation of multiple fixed collective identities by the borders between them, rather than the actively creative discursive interplay of social subjects. In such cases—cases where the nation has the most at stake in the articulation of difference—the concrete subjects of bordering are thus occluded by their own alienated, objectified and abstracted activity.

Crucially, this means that the concrete, particular subject of bordering is excluded from the creation, maintenance and manipulation of the national-political identity with which she identifies or in which she participates. In other words, due to the alienation, objectification and abstraction revealed by the foregoing analysis, *the articulation of national-political identities occurs by means of a suppression of the concrete subjects whose life-activity in fact structures—and is deeply structured by—these identities*. This suppression has at least three very important consequences that help explain the persistent relevance of borders in contemporary global society.

First, the suppression of the concrete subject of bordering activity entails that neither the negotiation of national-political identity, nor the determination of community membership, can take place through a robustly democratic process. This is because national borders articulate difference at a level of abstraction which can admit neither the particular bordering acts, nor the particular bordered identities, of concrete individuals.

Thus, the collective political identity of ‘the people’ cannot be given content by the particular people themselves.

This is, of course, a familiar problem as regards the initiation of popular sovereignty. As Ivor Jennings famously puts it, “The doctrine of self-determination... seemed reasonable: let the people decide. It was in fact ridiculous because the people cannot decide until somebody decides who are the people” (Jennings 1958, p. 56).³¹ The sentiment behind Jennings’s remark is a bit of political wisdom that emerged with the modern state, and I have already introduced it in the discussion of Machiavelli: “the people” of a polity is originally constituted through the undemocratic act of differentiating, or being differentiated by, an external other. Thus, even a democratic polity begins with a moment of undemocratic foundation.

However, in the present context, the problem is much more persistent. Despite the alienation, objectification and abstraction of the activity of particular bordering subjects, the constitution of collective political identities remains a perpetual process of articulation; it is not limited to a particular moment of founding. Because the agents of this ongoing articulation are abstract institutions rather than concrete individuals, and because the alienated and objectified articulatory process cannot reflect the activity of these individuals, the postponement of the popular determination of collective identity is also perpetual. The moment of undemocratic foundation endures as long as national identity is negotiated through national borders rather than by the bordering subjects themselves.

³¹ Cited in Dahbour 2005. Dahbour applies this problem to the democratic determination of national borders, although not as I conceive them. In the terms of my account, his investigation remains at the level of abstraction and fails to recognize the constant negotiation of political identity that occurs beneath the discourse of border politics.

It is important to notice that efforts to democratize the institution of borders cannot recapture the democratic potential lost in the suppression of the concrete bordering subject. Even if the legislation and administration of borders were made answerable to a deeply democratic process, as Étienne Balibar and others advocate, this process would only democratize the operations of an abstraction, thus perpetuating the alienation of bordering activity from its concrete subjects (Balibar 2004, p. 101-114).³² If the determination of collective political identity is to be rendered democratic, then the articulation of difference must be made democratic at its most basic level. This requires, as a first step, the retrieval of the suppressed subjects of bordering.

The second consequence of the suppression of the concrete bordering subjects is the concealment of the subjective bases which motivate the acts of inclusion, exclusion, identification and differentiation necessary to the articulation of political identity. As long as the negotiation of national-political identities occurs through the institutional mediation of claims to citizenship, rather than through the direct discursive interaction of particular individuals and groups, the affects, dispositions, prejudices and experiences which ultimately inform this negotiation go unrecognized. Thus, the abstraction that suppresses the concrete subjects of bordering also suppresses the most powerful forces informing a community's sense of self. Effectively, this renders the community opaque

³² Despite much affinity in our political analyses, Balibar calls for deeply democratic reforms that obviously preserve national borders as reified objects of administration and agents of social differentiation, rather than acknowledging the bordering activity of individuals and urging a retrieval of the bordering subject: "What can be done, in today's world, to *democratize the institution of the border*, that is, to put it at the service of men and submit it to their collective control, make it an object of their 'sovereignty,' rather than allowing it to subject them to powers over which they have no control... The task of democratizing borders—which implies that their representation be desacralized, that the way the state and administration use them with respect to individuals becomes the object of a multilateral control, and that the rites and formalities of crossing them become more respectful of fundamental rights—is at the heart of these difficulties, and perhaps, at present, the aporias, of a reinvention of politics in the context of 'globalization'" (Balibar 2004, p. 108, 114)

to itself, making self-understanding impossible and exempting the subjective bases of its political identification from any kind of critical inquiry. Nonetheless, these forces continue to operate invisibly, beneath the abstraction which masks them and, in the case of subjective motivations that can be duplicitously construed as universal, even *through* the abstraction.³³ Through the institution of borders, in other words, a community can legislate, enforce or otherwise realize subjective motives for inclusion and exclusion, or identification and differentiation, that it cannot even admit to itself.

This last possibility has long been recognized by critics who maintain that immigration controls and borders themselves are mechanisms for the institutional enforcement and official legitimization of racism (Hayter 2004, No One is Illegal! 2003). It is again important to realize that, if this is the case, attempts to ameliorate the situation via the reform or abolition of institutions remain at the level of abstraction and thus fail to address the concrete problem. Opening borders and abolishing immigration controls will not eliminate racism or its official sanction and, as history has repeatedly shown, these will likely find new and possibly more devious avenues of operation. Again, addressing the problems manifested by borders requires a return to, and a return of, the suppressed subjects of bordering.

³³ This is true not only for the institutional operations of national borders, but also for the way that borders functions in political rhetoric as a trope for the threatened, defended, open or closed homogeneity to which national-political identity aspires. See, for instance, President Bush's remark from June 2007: "Securing the border and upholding family values are not partisan concerns" (Babington 2007). A more vivid illustration of the linkage of border politics and 'American' identity is provided by the televised remarks of Dan Stein, a representative of the organization Federation for American Immigration Reform: "What they [groups funded by the Ford Foundation] want is a complete absence of US immigration controls, particularly the US/Mexico border. Their strategy has been to create a hollow core strategy where the Border Patrol just becomes this thin line around the US perimeter... Well, underneath the surface of all these groups is a radical political agenda led by a group called MECHA, which works to re-establish this mythical Chicano state called Aztlan. It -- it's based on the idea that the US is stolen territory... Through the stream of all of this is a streak of anti-Western bias. MALDEF also works to rewrite American history... challenging Texas's rendition of the Alamo, for example" (Federation for American Immigration Reform 2003).

Finally, the suppression of the bordering subjects creates a space of potential contradiction between the abstract politics of borders on the one hand, and the concrete activity of bordering performed by particular subjects on the other. As discussed above, the pretenses to universality present in the operations of national borders, as in Marx's state, conceal and suppress the potentially antagonistic articulation of particularity by concrete subjects. Nonetheless, this articulation does not cease; rather, it potentially grows more intense in the shadows of abstract universality. This accounts for the implicit compatibility between two seemingly contrary modes of constructing a political community and negotiating its identity: on the one hand, a national or regional commitment to open borders and inclusive citizenship, and, on the other hand, the continuation of local or intimate acts of violent exclusion. This compatibility is illustrated by the development of the European Union, where a remapping of local prejudices, nationalist ideology, and racial antagonism has attended the opening of its internal borders. Naturally, abstract border politics need not be inclusive, and concrete acts of bordering need not be exclusive. However, as long as the latter remain suppressed by the former, the national-political self remains susceptible to a constitutive split that cannot be resolved from within the perspective of abstraction alone.

The gap between abstract articulations of national-political identity and the bordering activity of concrete subjects can be an especially precarious place for ethnic minorities and, in particular, refugees. Such persons are often admitted through borders as ciphers bearing human rights, only to be excluded from more narrow articulations of national collective identity because of their real, perceived or fictionally ascribed claims to particularity. Thus, any satisfactorily deep "ethics of immigration," cannot simply

conclude that “policies of fairly open borders... are feasible and urgently required for the sake of humanity,” without also addressing the exclusivity of national communities at the level of concrete negotiations of collective identity (Bader 2007, p. 354). Once again, mending bordered life requires more than perforating borders; it requires penetrating abstraction itself to recover the suppressed bordering subjects.

Returning to the suppressed subjects of bordering would mean to examining the everyday bordering activity of actual, particular, concrete individuals and groups, as well as recognizing that the agency often attributed to national borders is a displacement of this activity. It would mean acknowledging that borders, as they are commonly understood, cannot function without this displacement. Thus, it would mean recognizing the complicity of concrete persons in the boundedness of their lives in common, in the constant operations of exclusion and inclusion that define their communities, and in the acts of identification and differentiation that determine their collective selves. Most importantly, it would mean recognizing that such complicity is enacted, not through the conscious delegation of bordering activity to an institutional apparatus, but through a continual abnegation of agency that is induced by processes of alienation, objectification and abstraction at work in the organization of social life and in the subject herself. Only by working against these processes, and restoring the concrete subject as the agent of national-political bordering, could the negotiation of collective political identity possibly be rendered democratic, self-conscious, accessible to critique and responsive to more intimately particular acts of identification and differentiation.

This task suggests future directions for political theory, psychoanalysis, philosophy and social theory—directions that all lead from borders to bordering.

Ironically, by working to retrieve the concrete subject of collective national identity formation, these so-called “soft” disciplines are uniquely suited to offer an important corrective to “hard” disciplines, such as geopolitics and international relations, which fail to see the abstraction at work in the concept and the institution of the border. Rather than outlining what such collaboration might look like, however, I want to conclude by returning to the sense of anachronism that originally motivated this paper.



As discussed above, the global nature of social and political trends stands, in the view of many, in direct contrast to the useful functioning of national borders. The relationships of interiority and exteriority, domestic and foreign, and familiar and unfamiliar that borders were once supposed to establish have lost any pretense to exclusivity, and the borders themselves constitute neither containers of political power nor areas of exclusive dominion. Persons, goods, information, organizational structures, ideas, culture, and identities transgress and transcend national borders every moment, as do violence, disease, famine and environmental destruction. In other words, the widest-reaching social, political and economic affairs of our contemporary world, along with its most powerful actors, have become progressively deterritorialized.

This global reconfiguration of power and problems indicates that, indeed, the sovereign territorial ideal has reached its limit. Sovereignty cannot retain its tight attachment to territory if it is to remain a meaningful and desirable political good in the 21st century. Nor can physical territory remain “an essentially defining feature” of the state if the latter is to remain capable of administering its own affairs (Weber 2004, p. 33). The ideal of territorial sovereignty is thus inadequate to the contemporary political world.

Inasmuch as this fading ideal was once the necessary condition and original animating principle of national borders, these institutions linger as anachronisms in contemporary global affairs. The world has changed such that, when borders do successfully perform the territorial functions ascribed to them by modern political thought, their operations appear to many as the mechanisms of “simple provincialism,” rather than the “the *sine qua non* for global stability” that they were once considered to be (Maus 2006, p. 466; Murphy 1996, p. 83). The “provincial” territoriality inconsistently enforced by national borders, once held as the *summum bonum* of state power, is now often viewed as an obstacle to political affairs. Consequently, national borders, as institutions of the outmoded sovereign territorial ideal, stand in an anachronistic relation to contemporary deterritorialized life.

The obsolescence of national borders, however, cannot be implied from their anachronism. Although they instantiate an outmoded ideal, borders may perform functions in contemporary society separate from those linked to the maintenance of territorial sovereignty.³⁴ Or again, they may have *always* performed important functions other than their explicitly legitimating purposes. To forget these possibilities is to equate the actual functioning of the institution with its modern ideal, and from here it is an easy and common misstep to expect the former to fade with the latter.

Over the course of this paper, my theorization of national borders has gradually shifted away from their modern conceptualization and, in particular, its emphasis on territoriality. In section II, I complicated traditional, modern geopolitical views of

³⁴ Nevak Soguk’s Foucaultian analyses of the Mexico-US border makes this point excellently. He argues that the US enforcement of the border does not, for the most part, effectively prohibit migrant workers from entering the state; it does, however, constitute a border-crossing experience that disciplines successful crossers into an underground economy that demands hard work, ingenuity, self-reliance and personal sacrifice in exchange for little reward (Soguk 1996).

borders with a loosely postmodern recognition of their discursive life, and I rejected neotraditional views for implicitly preserving the central conventions of their predecessors. In section III, I theorized borders as the activity of concrete social subjects, thereby inverting the genetic structure of the geopolitical views and attempting to overturn the subordination of subjects to space that is central to the ideal of territorial sovereignty. In section VI, I relied upon two thinkers from the beginning and end of modernity to develop the concepts that, in section V, I used to indicate new ways in which, independent of space or territory, the institution of borders indicates a subordination—this time a full-fledged suppression—of the subject. In short, my effort to rethink national borders has progressed in a double movement: away from the modern emphasis on territoriality, while, simultaneously, toward a recognition of the subordination of the bordering subject by the institution that once best served that territoriality.

At the end of this reconsideration, its two trajectories can be brought together to reformulate the question of the obsolescence of national borders in a way that avoids conflating the institution with its ideal. Instead of asking whether the institutions of sovereign territoriality have been rendered useless by deterritorialization, we can ask whether borders —*as alienated, objectified activity, as abstractions, and as anachronisms*— have been made obsolete by contemporary economic, social and political affairs. The reformulated question contains its solution. The answer is no. The original animating ideal of national borders may be on the decline, but their place in the globalizing world is assured, for the time being, by their role in the suppression of the concrete bordering subject. This *is* their contemporary function, or, at least one of them.

As the alienated, objectified and abstract bordering activity of concrete individuals and groups, borders ensure that determinations and negotiations of national-political identity are, in a very real way, out of the hands of the particular members of national-political communities. Because of this, the national-political identity in which concrete persons participate exists as something over and above them, from which they can draw meaning, but to which they cannot contribute with their own bordering activity, except insofar as this activity is separated from them, anonymized and reified into an abstract concept of “the people” which cannot admit the particular subjects out of which it originates. I have already discussed what I take to be three significant consequences of this suppression; it remains only to examine its relation to the eclipse of modern territoriality.



By suppressing the bordering subject from the determination of collective political identity, the alienation, objectification and abstraction at work in national borders retain a crucial function of the sovereign territorial ideal, even in an increasingly deterritorializing or post-territorial world. According to the early modern ideal of sovereignty, ruling over a people was an effect of ruling over a territory; territory defined “the people” over which sovereignty was exercised. This continued throughout the late modern period as well, as territory remained, for the most part, the determining basis of “the people” in whom popular sovereignty was located.³⁵ Now, ideally, no one ruled over

³⁵ See note 4, above. For this reason, I take issue with Ingeborg Maus’s recent claim that “The transition to the democratic nation-state was defined precisely by the fact that the territorial principle as a whole was replaced by that of an association of persons... the national identity of socialized people can no longer be defined by the territory in which they live” (Maus 2006, p. 467). As a reading of Kant, I can find no fault in Maus’s claim. As a claim about the nation-state, it neglects the fact that the “association of persons” was itself often defined in terms of territory. Nonetheless, Maus’s overall argument against the obsolescence of the nation-state is excellent, and it stands out as a major influence on my own, different, conclusions.

the subjects but themselves; however, the constitution of the community and its political identity could not be democratic, as this constitution necessarily preceded the *demos* of democracy. Territoriality thus remained the original criterion for the definition of the collective political subject. Even in the 20th century, territoriality remained the original determinant of the national-political identities of emergent polities. The famous Ivor Jennings remark quoted above (page 43) refers, not to the formation of European states in the 18th-19th centuries, but to the decolonization of their holdings following World War II. Here again, the territorial determination of collective political selves necessarily preceded the development of self-determination.

Territoriality, in short, has played a significant historical role in the necessarily heteronymous initial interpellations of collective political identity. As such, it has filled the empty position theorized by Machiavelli in *The Prince*, and it has been a powerful tool for actual princes—colonial powers, ethno-national leaders, and revolutionaries—to shape and control the membership and collective identities of political communities prior to their capacity for self-determination or self-definition. Seen from this perspective, territory has not been so much a defining limit of sovereign power, as it is conceived in Weber's definition of the state, but as mechanism for gaining and exercising power.

In his book *Human Territoriality*, geographer Robert Sack generalizes this last point, defining territoriality as “a powerful geographic strategy to control people and things by controlling area” (Sack 1986, p. 5). He lists several tendencies of territoriality, the basic tenor of which should be familiar:

3. Territoriality can be the most efficient strategy of *enforcing* control...
4. Territoriality provides a means of *reifying* power.

5. Territoriality can be used to *displace* attention from the relationship between the controller and the controlled to the territory... territory appears as the agent doing the controlling.
6. By classifying at least in part by area rather than by kind or type, territoriality helps make relationships *impersonal*.
7. ...Territory appears as a general, *neutral*, essential means by which a place is made... (Sack 1986, p. 32-3; original emphasis)

Territoriality, I have suggested, has functioned historically as a mechanism for the heteronymous and undemocratic formation of collective political identity; Sacks's work elaborates this function, stressing the displacing, anonymizing, objectifying and neutralizing tendencies of this mechanism. The historical function of territoriality thus appears to be homologous to the contemporary role of borders, once borders are understood as the alienated, objectified and abstract bordering activity of concrete subjects, and once their contemporary function is understood as the suppression of those subjects from the determination of their own collective political identities.

This homology clarifies the relation between territoriality and the contemporary role of national borders. As the former becomes an increasingly less viable strategy of power in a progressively deterritorialized world, the latter has come to take its place. The undemocratic, heteronymous interpellation of a national-political identity persists, after the sovereign territorial ideal, in that ideal's primary institution. National borders—as the alienated, objectified and abstracted political identity negotiations of concrete subjects—thus import a very *modern* dynamic into today's allegedly *postmodern* world. By suppressing the concrete subjects of bordering from the determination of their own collective identities, the discursive function of national borders continues the work of Machiavelli's sovereign, by undemocratically interpellating “a people” via the alienation of its particular members. Thus, borders preserve the modern political logic whereby the

constitution of a political community and its identity is prior to, and untouched by, popular sovereignty.

However, this political logic has not simply been held over, unchanged, from modernity; rather, in its transition from the territorial ideal to the borders that once served this ideal, the heteronymous interpellation of the collective political subject has been post-modernized. As discussed above, the constant articulatory activity of national borders ensures that the heteronymous, undemocratic founding of the political community persists, continually, as long as the bordering activity of concrete subjects is alienated, objectified and abstracted to the border institution. Moreover, the interpellation is no longer restrictively spatialized; as the above analyses indicate, the alienation of bordering activity is not limited to particular geographic areas, but occupies a diversity of discursive space. Thus, it occurs in the ‘interiors’ as well as the ‘frontiers’ of nation-states, throughout their dispersed or concentrated constituent populations. In short, the moment of heteronymous, undemocratic interpellation is both perpetual and pervasive; “the people” is created and recreated via the suppression of the concrete people themselves, in every border operation of admission or exclusion, and identification or differentiation.

Consequently, far from being rendered obsolete by deterritorialization, borders perform a function that is perfectly compatible with contemporary global affairs. By perpetually and pervasively effecting the suppression of the concrete subjects of collective political identities, national borders inherit the sovereign territorial ideal’s subordination of subjects to space, and adapt it to a post-territorial and postmodern world.

No longer subordinate to space, concrete subjects are now suppressed by their own alienated, objectified and abstracted negotiations of collective political identity.

All of this suggests that, in the words of the anti-G8 poster cited in the introduction to this paper (page 3), “As deterritorialisation is enacted, everyone finds themselves constituent of a new social reality” (FeS and image-shift 2007). This new reality, however, is not the unbordered world that the poster’s creators hope for and work toward. Rather, it is one in which borders take on a particularly post-territorial role, intensifying and multiplying the heteronymous, undemocratic and alienated constitution of politics and collective political identities first theorized by Machiavelli in 1513 and elaborated by Marx in the early 1840’s. If we look forward to a new form of social life, one that truly renders this modern logic obsolete, we will have to pin our hopes to something other than deterritorialization. That something, as I have suggested, may very well be a recovery of the concrete bordering subject. By theorizing the activity of bordering, revealing the alienation, objectification and abstraction of this activity, and tracking the intensified suppression of the concrete bordering subject in the movement from modernity to the present, I hope to have opened new paths toward such a recovery.

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